

School Readiness in Indigenous Children: Recommended Research and Development processes: Summary of Preliminary Consultations

Executive Summary

Introduction

In April till July 2007, 48 experts from a range of both research and service delivery backgrounds from around Australia were consulted regarding their recommendations for development of a new research agenda (Child Health, Education and Development alliance) aimed at addressing the issue of 'school readiness' in Indigenous populations in the Northern Territory. This report summarises consultant's views and includes information from an extensive mapping exercise of relevant best-practice initiatives around Australia.

In general, consultants agreed that the field of early childhood research in Australia is currently marked by a lack of solid evidence around 'what works' (efficacy and effectiveness studies) in Indigenous communities. However, many consultants acknowledged that a lot of good work being done has neither been sufficiently evaluated nor published, and therefore emphasised the need to draw also on the considerable expertise and practice-wisdom of established Indigenous education and early childhood workers in any planning processes.

Key Process and Practice Issues

Consultants recommendations differed in their focus on a concept of 'what's needed now', and establishing best-practice service delivery, versus an emphasis on a 'more viable' discrete research approach, and the need to first establish evidence around 'what works' in indigenous communities.

No matter the model or approach however, the majority of consultants agreed on a number of key process and practice issues that the group will need to consider:

- A primary task for the Child Health, Education and Development alliance is to establish a clear concept of what consists 'School Readiness', and what it should '*look like*' in indigenous children; what variables the group will be seeking to influence, as well as outcomes the group will be looking to measure. Many consultants emphasised a need to establish community views around what children need, and want to achieve.
- Any program or research process needs to be firmly embedded in indigenous community and culture. Consultants largely agreed that community involvement in all stages of planning and delivery is the best way to ensure cultural and community relevance of program content and delivery as well as to ensure community engagement, acceptance and ownership of both research processes and programs delivered.
- While some consultants advocated development and trialing of evidence-based interventions, others questioned the applicability of established models as well as of traditional (Western) research approaches to indigenous communities due to cultural difference, as well as due to the practicalities of working in extremely disadvantaged and remote conditions.
- Consultants remind the Child Health, Education and Development alliance that a significant body of research indicates that no matter the *type* of program, *program quality* and particularly quality of relationships across all levels is in fact the single most important process factor leading to efficacy of any approach chosen.

Potential avenues for research on school readiness: 'What works?'

Many consultants recommended undertaking foundational research into Indigenous early childhood development before 'rushing headlong' into program trials. They considered that there is a need to establish a greater understanding of program variables (such as Indigenous development and learning styles) as well as better evidence around program strategies and measurement tools as a basis for designing and developing interventions.

Several consultants considered however, that sufficient evidence exists to support the development and trialling of programs based on models already shown to have been effective in a range of population samples. While several models were proposed and discussed, home-visiting models such as the David Olds model were considered most appropriate to this sort of approach. Rather than efficacy studies consultants emphasised effectiveness studies and establishing '*what will work best considering all the barriers*'.

Consultants also held mixed views around appropriate methodologies to be employed in the indigenous setting. While some supported use of Randomised Controlled Trial (RCT) methodology and randomisation of communities to intervention groups, others considered that a RCT would be practically very difficult to establish in remote indigenous communities, and in fact, offer quite a limited understanding of processes and factors effecting eventual outcomes.

A large number of consultants therefore advocated development of alternative evaluation methodologies including in-depth qualitative methods, and participatory action research.

Principles of service delivery: 'What's needed now'

Furthermore, a large number of consultants were dubious about the capacity of discrete programs as tested in intervention trials, to create lasting and sustainable change in communities facing such a broad range of complex and intersecting needs and issues. These consultants stressed the need for development of more *comprehensive* and *integrated* service delivery approaches, as well as *continuous* service delivery models.

Acknowledging that such approaches are not amenable to discrete trialing and RCT methodology, advocates of such approaches recommended '*outcome-focused*' *planning and evaluation*, as a basis for any programs or projects developed. Consultants also emphasised the need for more detailed *process-level evaluation* alongside measurement of outcomes, and a better understanding of *how* strategies logically lead to outcomes.

Finally a majority of consultants considered that focused community development in remote communities is a vital antecedent to the success of any more specific intervention work. Given that most Community Development models focus on developing local capacity to create and sustain change within their own communities, consultants advised that training, as well as ongoing support and mentoring of local indigenous research and program staff would be essential to sustainability of any initiatives developed. Participatory action research methodology also supports a community development approach. It emphasises community consultation as well as practical involvement and engagement of community members in all stages of the research process. It aims to develop local capacity to own and sustain local development work.

Summary and concluding comments

Overall, in approaching a field with so little established 'evidence' attached to it, the group faces a very broad range of possibilities for engagement in research into improving 'School Readiness' involving varied sectors and strategies.

In considering the range of recommendations made, there may appear initially to be a conflict between a focus on development of discrete program trials (and RCT methodology), and an emphasis on comprehensive service delivery, outcome-focused planning, and community development approaches. It seems likely however, that further discussions between consultants would reveal a greater compatibility of approaches than initially apparent, and that views may represent an emphasis on different stages of a potential research and program development continuum.

The group will need to decide upon priority areas of interest and participation, or indeed look towards establishing a more comprehensive scheme of involvement at varied levels. This may include; projects involving foundational research into program variable and strategies such as family engagement, intervention or effectiveness trials, as well as development of evaluation methodologies useful and relevant to the Australian Indigenous context.